

Readings: Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Text: John 20:25b "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, ...I will not believe."

Theme: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*

I'd like to start with a confession: I like Thomas. That is his Aramaic name, which is Twin in Greek. NT scholar, D. A Carson, is not sure about John's purpose in giving this particular disciple both his Aramaic and Greek names, but I know the decision has confused many readers who think Thomas has a twin.

Thomas is my kind of theologian. He operates like a scientist. He gets his data (facts), analyses them quickly and thoroughly, and then makes a sound and profound conclusion. We really should be celebrating, perhaps, the most profound theological insight we can find in the Bible when he declared that the risen Christ is, '*My Lord and my God!*'

But poor Thomas. He can turn, and turn, and turn in his grave, but he will never be able to rid himself of the negative moniker, 'doubting Thomas' since it has become part of our vocab. How did he earn such a name?

Well, we all know it. It is found in the gospel reading for today, which the lectionary has set as the gospel reading for the second Sunday after Easter every year. We can put down Thomas's unfortunate title to poor interpretation, but I have the suspicion that a prominent person, sometime in the life of the early church, did not like Thomas and decided to emphasise Thomas's initial doubt, and ignored Thomas's profound theological insight. To do justice to Thomas and the writer, we need to consider the context of the passage.

Today's passage is part of John's resurrection story. So we need to consider John's whole resurrection story. Further, we need to bear in mind that, 'to see' in John, is to believe.

John's resurrection story begins at the beginning of chapter 20. Mary Magdalene went early to the grave and found it emptied. So, she went and told the disciples. Peter and another disciple went and saw and they believed Mary's story that Jesus' body was not in the tomb.

The disciples returned home while Mary stayed behind. A while later, Jesus appeared to Mary and talked with her. She went and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; that is, she believed the Lord had risen. But none of the disciples said anything, which meant, they did not believe Mary.

In today's passage, Jesus appeared before the disciples behind locked doors. After he greeted the disciples, 'he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord' (v20). But Thomas was absent.

The original Greek texts seem to suggest that Thomas had left the group, perhaps believing it was over with Jesus now dead. Later on, some of the disciples must have come across Thomas and they told him that, "We have seen the Lord," (v25). That is, they believed that Jesus had

risen from the dead. Because Thomas was not there. So, he told his friends, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, ... I will not believe," (v25). He saw the scars of Jesus' wound, and he believed.

We can see a clear pattern that the writer is developing. Mary saw the risen Jesus and she believed. She told the disciples, but they did not believe. Then the disciples saw the risen Jesus, and now they also believed. They told Thomas who was absent when Jesus appeared before them, and Thomas did not believe. Then Thomas saw the scars of Jesus' wounds, and he believed.

So seeing led to belief, while hearing did not lead to belief. More importantly, the other disciples also did not believe when Mary told them that Jesus had risen. So, all the disciples were guilty of unbelief or doubt, and not just Thomas.

Now, we need to remember that John's gospel was written decades after the resurrection and in the early days of the church. So it is likely that the writer was trying to tell the readers something that was symbolic of the resurrected Lord and the church.

We can see this when we consider the epistle reading, from John's first letter. John begins his letter by saying, "*We declare to you ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, ... so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete,*" (1 Jn.1:1-4).

When John wrote his gospel and his letters, he was writing to a generation that did not see Jesus in life and did not experience the resurrection first hand. In today's gospel reading, John is recalling the experience of those that were present at the resurrection, where seeing led to belief, while hearing others testimonies did not lead to belief. But for those who were not present at the resurrection, the generation that John was writing for, they would have to content with the testimonies of the disciples. So, near the end of the gospel reading, Jesus declares, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,*" (v29). John follows this up in first his letter, as shown above. And who was John writing to? The general belief is that he was writing to the church.

In the reading from Acts, we see that the church at its beginning was a model of unity: "*... those who believed were of one heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership; everything was held in common,*" (Acts 4:32). But by chapter six, cracks were beginning to appear. The Hellenists were unhappy that their orphans and widows had been neglected.

There were also external forces, especially from false teachings. Yes, the body of the risen Lord, the church, was being pierced on the side, when the generations that now had to depend on the church's story were having problems with belief in what they were hearing, the testimonies of those who witnessed Jesus and the Easter events. And the church has been fractured ever since. So Jesus' statement, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,*" was not for Thomas, but for us who have to rely on the same testimonies that we read in the Gospels of the evangelists and in the letters of the Apostles.

It is unfortunate that the negative image that we have of Thomas has endured, when he made the greatest theological statement that we can find in the Bible. Further, it is widely known that Thomas made it all the way to India, which suggests the depth of his belief. Moreover, Thomas's approach to theology is the most credible way to do theology: get the facts and analyse them under the lens of scriptures.

The body of the risen Lord, the church, is always broken, but it is healed and sustained by the word of life that he has risen! and that he is alive! Thanks to the witness of Thomas, because he was the only one who saw the scars of the risen Lord, and we can believe his testimony. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

For the glory of God. Amen.